



Parashat Beshalach: A Jewish approach to war and peace

IN THE Jewish tradition, the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, is read every week in the synagogue and the portion for each week carries with it a Hebrew name. On the Shabbat of January 27, we read *Parashat Beshalach* (Exodus 13:17-17:16).

This famous Torah portion describes the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt, with the “miracle” of the parting of the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds, and the famous song or poem known as “Shirat Hayam” (the Song of the Sea), which became part of the daily liturgy in the morning prayers over the centuries. In fact, this Shabbat has become known as *Shabbat Shira* (The Sabbath of the Song) because of the centrality of this poem in the biblical story of the Exodus.

Yet, this famous text in Exodus 15 has some very problematic verses. For example, the first verse: “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. They said, I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.”

How can God do this? What kind of God is this that delights when some people are thrown into the sea and destroyed? Can God really be pleased with this action? Is God one-sided? Does he want certain human beings or certain peoples to triumph in war and others to be the clear losers? In short, is our God a God of war or of peace?

The interpretative Jewish tradition known as the Midrash provides at least one remarkably humanistic answer to this problem. When the angels sang a song of rejoicing after the Israelites passed through the Sea of Reeds, God chastised them: “At that moment, the ministering angles wished to utter

song before the Holy One, but He rebuked them, saying, ‘The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter song in my presence.’” (“The Books of Legends,” edited by Bialik and Ravnitsky).

According to this idea, our rejoicing is never complete if someone else needs to suffer for our liberation from Egypt, both physically and metaphorically. All human beings are created in the image of God, and we should not rejoice when any human being is killed. This Midrash is so central in Jewish tradition that it has been incorporated into many contemporary Haggadahs, the story that Jews read at the Passover Seders in order to recall the Exodus from Egypt – both the one in biblical times and the one in the 20th century that led to the establishment of the State of Israel.

Yet, the Torah text continues and becomes even more perplexing. In Exodus 15:3 we read the very troublesome verse: “The Lord, the Warrior – Lord is His Name.” Other translations render this: “God is a man of war.”

According to Rabbi Gunther Plaut, the editor of the Reform Jewish commentary on the Torah, this concept is natural to biblical thought, in which God is Israel’s protector and, if need be, will fight for His people.

But the Midrash had mixed views about this. On the one hand, there was a notion in Jewish tradition that God fights the war for the Jewish people. So, for example, according to the Midrash known as the *Mechilta* – a line by line series of interpretations of the Book of Exodus – we can see that God fights Israel’s battles for them and that the other nations of the world need to be aware of this.

ACCORDING TO this view, which we might call a “nationalist” viewpoint, God is on our side, the side of the Jews, and He will fight our battles for us. Despite universalistic tendencies in the Bible and in many places in the Midrash, this idea of God is a more tribal than universalistic one. He fights the good fight for his people. This is a troubling concept and has undoubtedly been one of the causes for many religious wars throughout history, up to the present day. This is, therefore, a highly problematic text.

Yet, the Jewish tradition tries to ameliorate, to soften the concept, to add some nuance, which is very helpful. Accordingly, the most famous of all Jewish commentators on the Bible, known as Rashi, offered his own unique interpretation to this verse by suggesting that even in war, God is merciful.

This is a reminder to the Jewish people and to human beings in general: Even if war becomes “just,” i.e. a necessity sometimes, one must be careful and humane in waging war. Massacres or genocide or ethnic cleansing are clearly not acceptable. There are rules even for warfare, which are spelled out later in the Bible (for example in Deuteronomy 20:10: “When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace”) as well as in later Jewish tradition.

The various interpretations above reflect interpretations within Judaism with regard to war and peace. Nevertheless, I would argue that Jewish sayings and dictates about peace far outweigh those in favor of war. There are many classic Jewish pronouncements about peace, which can be found, such as, “If there is no peace, there is



nothing at all, for Scripture goes on to say, ‘And I will give Peace in the Land’ (Psalm 26:6), which indicates that peace equals all else. Indeed, we say in the morning prayers, ‘When He made peace, He created everything.’” (“The Book of Legends”)

In addition, our synagogue services are replete with prayers for peace that ought to influence the consciousness of contemporary Jews. And many synagogues have added special prayers for peace to keep us mindful of our responsibility of seeking peace all the time, for the Jewish people, and for all who dwell on Earth.

So, I return to the question of whether in the Jewish tradition, God is perceived as a God of war or not?

“Nowhere [in the Jewish tradition] does one find militant, angry, warlike or violent images of God held up as worthy of emulation. The sages carefully filtered divine actions on their way to a more compassionate understanding of God, and that evolving belief shaped what they asked of the Jewish people. The softer, gracious image of God became the model to which to aspire.” (Rabbi Sheldon Lewis in “The Torah of Reconciliation”)

Furthermore, I would add that the idea that traditional Jewish sources actually call for peace and reconciliation – and not just for conquest, occupation and settlement – is unfortunately virtually unknown, or simply completely sublimated in Israeli society, especially in establishment circles here.

I wish that every rabbi in Israel – including those in the Orthodox establishment – would come to understand how central these values are in Judaism. They might even begin to preach and teach peace to their congregants and to the Israeli public at large! Wouldn’t that be a refreshing change! And maybe even some of our politicians – especially some of those on the so-called “religious Right” – might learn some new ideas, which would influence Israel’s search for peace with our neighbors!

IN PSALM 43:15, we find the famous verse, “*bakesh shalom v’rodfeihu*,” “Seek peace and pursue it.” According to the Midrash, “Seek peace, and pursue it means that you should seek it in your own place, and pursue it even to another place as well.” (Leviticus Rabbah 9:9) Seeking peace is not enough; one must be an activist

in pursuing it at all times.

Too many people in our part of the world – especially in Israel and the Palestinian Authority in recent years – have given up on the idea of seeking peace. They live with a mixture of denial and apathy; they live with perpetual despair and they have lost hope in their politicians, as is happening in other countries, when it comes to seeking peace (and with regard to other issues, such as consistent and contemptable corruption).

But denial and apathy are not useful in the long run. More people will have to realize the benefits of peace, for both Israeli and Palestinian societies, as opposed to the dangers and delusions of ongoing war and violence.

I, for one, have not given up on the idea of peace. According to the Jewish tradition, it is one of our most precious values. We are a people who have kept the dream of *shalom* alive for so many centuries. It is not the time to ignore it or bury it now.

In Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 1:12, we read, “Rabbi Hillel said: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it, bringing them to Torah.”

We Jews are meant to be the disciples of Aaron. Let us not forget it. On the contrary, we ought to be leading the way toward peace since it is one of our central values and it is in our enlightened self-interest to do so. ■

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